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ABSTRACT

The goal of civic education, as discussed in this paper, is responsible political activism. Although the word activism tends to conjure a negative image of a revolutionary student body for some, the term is used here to express active participation in the decision making process, respect for others' opinions, and upholding one's beliefs. In this view, education should approve of and encourage student activism. Schools, often in an effort to keep the peace, preserve the status quo regardless of the issue and opt for passivity of students. Activism then, can be explained, not by school activities but, rather, by out of school experiences. When a credibility gap exists between schools and students, activism may be a reaction not only to education, which often ignores social problems and ills of today, but also to schools which do not reflect participatory democracy. If civic education is to effect responsible student activism positively, it needs to provide curricular content reflecting the reality of political and social life and, further, to furnish a model of active and mindful civic behavior worthy of emulation, encouraging and providing a climate for student participation within school walls. (SJM)

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Needed: A Democratizing of the Schools?

It is imperative in a democracy that the citizen be active for the causes in which he believes. Activism may be directed at conserving present value or it may be directed at changing a present condition or injustice. The ideal end to be sought is mindful and socially responsible activism. We neither want to create a society of revolutionaries nor a society dominated by the status quo. Mindful change for the improved quality of all our lives is the only reasonable goal. In a democracy, this must mean the encouragement of mindful non-conformism as well as of mindful conformism. Mindless conformity and obedience, frequently confused with patriotism, is not consistent with democracy; it is a travesty on democracy to teach children blind patriotism. Democracy was born in an act of disobedience--it could easily die in an act of obedience. The greatest courage required of the citizen is that of standing for what he believes is right, in opposition, if need be, to the majority. Abraham Lincoln recognized this truth when he said, "It is a sin to be silent when it is your duty to protest."

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Democracy is a pragmatic philosophy unburdened by dogmas except that which respects the right of the individual to participate in political choice. For democracy to work, the citizen must want to participate in the decision making process, he must be protected in this right and he must believe in his own intelligence and political efficacy. At the same time, he must respect the opinion of others for under the rules of democracy, minority opinion may become majority opinion, as it frequently does in the United States.

The goal of civic education in a democracy must be mindful political activism. In such a society, the end in view is the progressive resolution of social ills and the improvement of society. This should never be confused with mere social tranquility or with the suppression of the aggrieved. In the words of B. F. Skinner, "The only geniuses produced by the chaos of society are those who do something about it."

In this view, education should look with favor on student activism. It is not a phenomenon to be spurned or suppressed, but rather to be cultivated and directed into useful channels of public service and individual self-fulfillment. It is the citizen who is passive, indifferent,

or skeptical of democratic institutions that pose the greater threat to American democracy. The most frightening aspect of the American situation today is the growing number of our young citizens who doubt the credibility of the system or have lost hope that we can rectify cancerous social ills. To the extent that the schools have produced mindful activism, we have succeeded; to the extent that we have produced indifference, we have failed democracy.

Many school people disclaim responsibility for today's student activism, fearing to be seen in the public eye as a devisive influence or as sowing discontent with the status quo. It is doubtful, however, that schools can claim the credit for student activism, for the heavy weight of education is clearly on the side of mindless obedience and conformity to the status quo. Student activism is better explained by the out-of-school experiences of youth in a world of instant information via modern media, a world which finds it increasingly difficult to hide from the view of youth the discrepancies between the ideal and the realities of the social scene whether at home or in far away Vietnam. There is the possibility that student activism is a reaction to the

mindless unreality of the school in the face of modern instant access to information from the real world. Many students, frequently including the most intelligent, are fed up with the "we are the greatest, all is right with the world" versions of society taught in school, which are in such vivid contrast to the tensions and catastrophic problems bannered on daily newspapers every day. There is also the possibility that a credibility gap exists between students and the school establishment because the school establishment does not reflect participatory democracy. Rather than from among their teachers, students find their civic heros among their own peers or among those in the world of art or music.

The stand I am taking is not for more student activism merely for the sake of activism We have student activism in America already on a scale never dreamed of a mere five or ten years ago. A very intelligent and articulate minority of the students in every high school and college in America and in many elementary schools are in well reasoned rebellion against the bureaucratic lock step of the American educational system. Polls indicate that well over half of the student population in American schools covertly support this rebellion. If we count among the rebellious

those who have pre-maturely dropped out of school and, more significantly, those who, while remaining in school, have simply turned us off and are no longer listening to our shop worn prescriptions, it becomes clear that our schools face a major crises of wills. It is not more of this kind of confrontation nor is it more repressive measures that are needed. Rather it is the opening up of new channels of communication and interaction both among students and between students and adults that is imperative. Children are right in insisting that education somehow speak more clearly to the problems of America and they are right, in the face of so much uncertainty, that education be freer than it is; that in a nation which professes democratic principles, schools must themselves be symbols of democracy. They are right in resisting the mindless and senseless tasks to which they are too often set in school. They are right in resisting the heavy bureaucracy and authoritarianism so common in the American educational establishment. But mere negative activism arising out of exasperation and disillusionment with the system does not add up to a good education. It does afford the opportunity and the drive for reforms in education long overdue. Student activism should be seized upon as

an opportunity; to treat it as an ill is to run the risk of destroying all that is positive in the American democratic system.

Having said this, I shall make two claims concerning the teacher and civic education as follows:

1) If civic education is to have a positive effect on the development of responsible student activism, it must provide curricular content which reflects the reality of political and social life; mythological heros' tales, and oversimple or clearly biased versions of history and current affairs will no longer do.

2) If civic education is to have a positive affect in developing mindful student activism, teachers and school administrators must exemplify, in their own style of living, in and out of school, a model of active and mindful civic behavior worthy of emulation. The school as an institution should also furnish a model of such behavior.

May I now develop my second claim which is the concern of this seminar in some depth. The claim is that the school as a system and its faculty as individuals within the system, must provide a model of mindful activism if it is the expectation that this kind of social behavior is

to be assumed by students. Democratic ways of behaving can hardly be learned in an arbitrary or authoritarian school climate. Mindful activism will hardly follow from the example of teachers who demonstrate no confidence in intellectuality or who, through either slothfulness or fear, disengage themselves from public affairs, choosing not to become involved. That the young emulate those whom they find most credible is well attested to by studies in education and psychology. The credibility of schools and school people as models for youthful emulation is seriously compromised by the evident hypocracy in our schools between word and deed. Exhortation to think and to be one's own man are hardly credible in a system which puts so many restrictions on thinking and in which one may be actually punished for showing independence of thought. Mindful activism is hardly credible when learned about from timorous or pacifistic teachers. Schools are hardly credible where preoccupation with the trivial has driven the really important questions out of the realm of education or where living strictly by the rule is given more importance than questioning the validity of the rule. Schools lack credibility where arbitrary and authoritarian administrative practices

charade as democracy. Students in such schools are forced to turn their emulation to more convincing and more credible models outside the school or from among their own peers.

To what extent do schools provide a climate for the development of student capacity for mindful activism? To what extent do teachers provide models worthy of emulation in this respect? On both counts, I must be very critical of American education.

In the words of one analyst, schools are concerned more with maintaining authority and exacting obedience than with building self-esteem and individuality.[1] Numerous studies, including those by Stouffer,[2] and by Hess and Forney[3] merely confirm what is well known that schools evaluate the behavior of students mainly on the basis of respect for authority and orderly behavior including conformity to school regulations, however arbitrary these may be, and at the same time tend to disregard or depreciate active democratic participation. Students soon learn to

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[1]Friedenberg, Edgar Z., The Vanishing Adolescent, 70-174.

[2]Stouffer, George A. W., "Behavior Problems of Children as Viewed by Teachers and Mental Hygienists."

[3]Hess, Robert D. and Forney, Judith V., "The Development of Basic Attitudes and Values Toward Government and Citizenship During the Elementary School Years."

hunt for the right signals and to give the teacher the response wanted sometimes at the cost of considerable loss in self-esteem and individuality.

Why are schools so oppressive of independent thinking and democratic participation on the part of students? It is because school people take quite seriously their function to prepare children for adult roles by giving them the values, knowledges, and skills believed by adults to be desirable. The legal basis of the school accents this paternalistic relationship. Students are required by law to attend school. Since children are presumed to be innocent of their adult needs, adults prescribe what shall be taught and how the school will be operated. While in school, students are subject to the authority of school officials, and have very little to say about what and how they are to be taught.

School administrators tend to see the school as an agency of the government and of the community to which they are answerable in terms of the efficiency with which prescribed values, knowledge and skills are transmitted to children. Administrators tend to become preoccupied with matters of efficiency and control. Careful observers of American educational institutions are struck by the too apparent parallels between

such institutions and the lock step of military establishment. The movement of students through the system is carefully controlled at almost every point, the enforcers being grades and the threatened loss of extra curricular privileges. Student government, notoriously farcical, is used primarily to dissipate hostility to arbitrary controls rather than to permit any real participation in control. Without delving in depth into the subject, may I suggest that students are the last important group in America from whom are withheld their basic civic rights. The privacy of students may be invaded by school authorities at will. Students may be convicted of violating the most arbitrary of school rules without even a semblance of due process. It is no wonder in America today that thousands upon thousands of students, including many of the most intelligent, are in open or silent revolt against the system which, despite the best of intentions, is intolerably oppressive and almost completely destructive of the ends of mindful activism. In many schools, the revolt is so widespread that schools are literally in a state of seige and teachers are in embarrassed route.

Some would meet the problem of student restiveness by tightening disciplinary controls. Students would be assumed to be both errant and arrogant and no appeasement and no negotiation would be tolerated. Others see in the situation the need for a genuine sharing in decision-making in the school and the opportunity to demonstrate the workability of democratic institutions as well as to teach the skills and attitudes associated with democracy. These see student restiveness and activism as an opportunity for important learning.

This seminar was arranged to afford the occasion to discuss or, perhaps, even argue, this question.